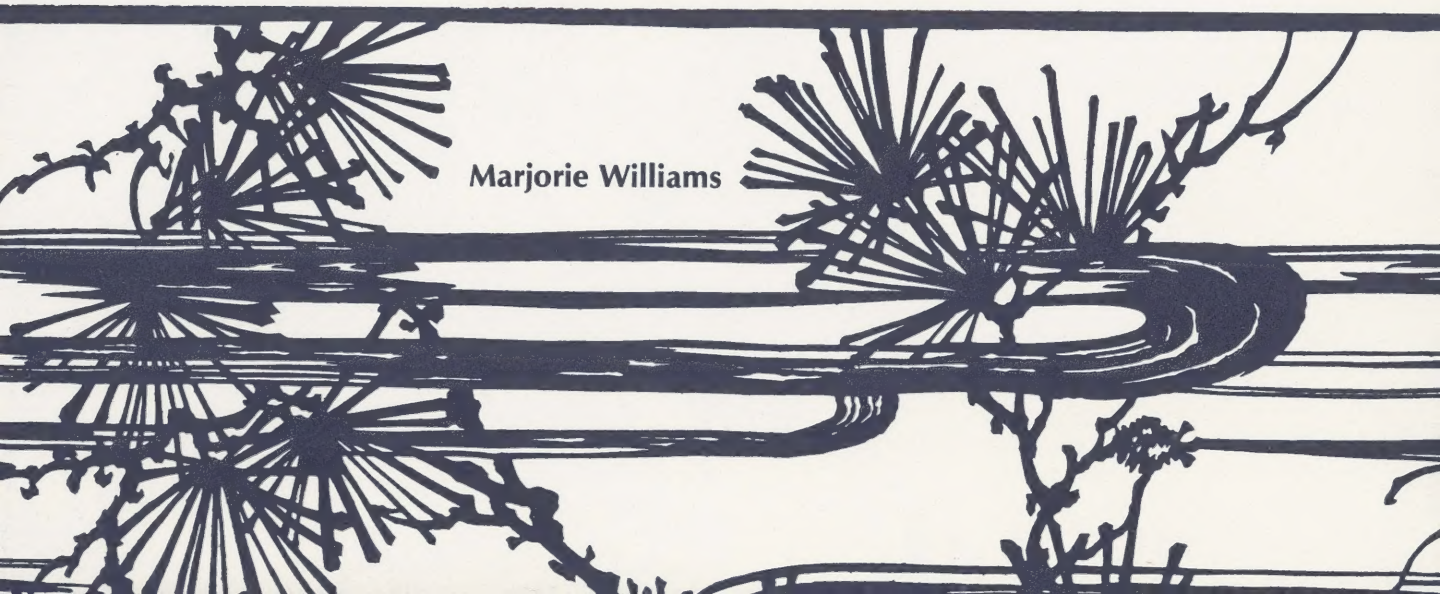
RESISTANT RHYTHMS

The Art of Japanese Stencils



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Department of Education
The Cleveland Museum of Art

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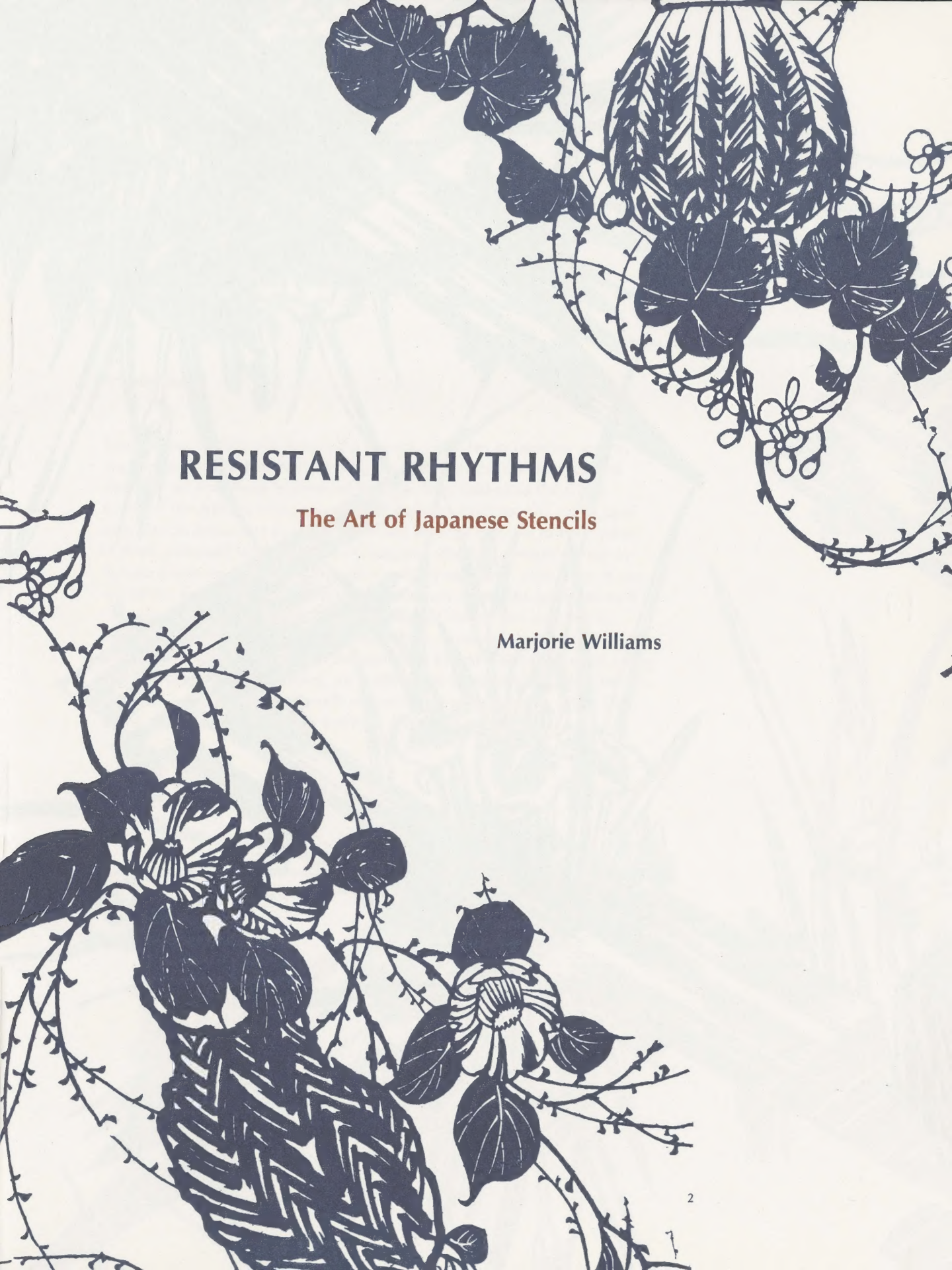

RESISTANT RHYTHMS

The Art of Japanese Stencils

Marjorie Williams

Introduction

Textiles have traditionally occupied a respected position in Japanese society. They are prized for their brilliant designs—almost always asymmetrical and vigorous, yet sometimes intricate while other times bold—and the skillful talents of the artisans who created them. ***Resistant Rhythms: The Art of Japanese Stencils*** introduces an often overlooked art form essential to the creation of dyed, patterned fabric—stencils or *katagami*. Rhythmic designs cut out of durable paper are transferred through a resist-dying process onto strips of cotton fabric. A rice paste is applied through the stencil onto the fabric before it is submerged into vats of indigo. The paste simply "resists" the dye, that is, prevents the indigo from penetrating the fabric, retaining the white color of the cloth underneath. The designs of the stencils in the exhibition, almost all dating from the late nineteenth century, are easily imagined as blue-and-white fabrics. The dark, solid areas of the stencils represent the indigo patterns, while the white, negative patterns are the resistant rhythms of the design.

Materials and Techniques

Mulberry bark, persimmon juice, and silk threads—natural and plentiful materials—form the components of stencils. An individual stencil is composed of several sheets of paper made from mulberry bark *(kozo)* and painted with persimmon juice or tannin *(kakishibu)* which gives it a warm brown tone. The tannin waterproofs the paper, making it strong yet maleable. The treated paper is generally seasoned from three to fifteen years before use.

A stencil artisan is highly specialized, a master of both an individual pattern (such as stripes or floral motifs) and of surgical-like tools and numerous cutting techniques. Dark brush-strokes, the initial guidelines for the design, appear along the edges of many stencils. Next, the artisan begins the difficult task of cutting innumerable perforations through several layers of paper. He separates them to insert a mesh of silk threads *(sha),* which adds delicate reinforcement to the intricate designs, and then carefully realigns the patterns. Frequently the artisan's wife completes this *itoire* technique, which originated in 1855. A

wooden, pegged board holds the individual filaments before they are secured to the paper with persimmon tannin. The stencil is customarily aged for approximately three years, allowing the silk and paper to fuse.

Stencil artists then entrust their painstaking creations to a stenciler who applies the rice paste through the stencil onto bolts of cotton weave. The cloth is stretched the length of a moistened board *(nagaita)* about 252 inches long and 17-3/4 inches wide. Most of the stencils in this exhibition have a standard size, approximately 16 inches in either length or width. This outer measurement fits the width of the board, while the size of the actual patterns corresponds to that of the fabric strips which are generally 13 inches wide. The artisan positions the stencil at one end of the board and spreads the paste over it with a wooden spatula. A stencil design may be repeated as many as fifty times over the surface of the cloth to cover the full length of the fabric. Register dots at the corners of the stencils assist in juxtaposing the repeated patterns. The stenciled fabric is then dried outdoors or on rods suspended from the workshop ceiling before being rolled up and sent to the dyer.

Double stencils were commonly used in creating patterns too complicated and intricate to be cut from a single stencil. The *omogata,* or main stencil, held about two-thirds of the pattern, while a secondary stencil completed the design. Rice paste was first applied through the main stencil, then through the second one positioned over the first layer of starch by aligning register marks. Another use of paired stencils, such as the ones in this exhibition, was probably to add color accents to the design. The paste was initially spread onto the fabric through the primary stencil. After dying, the resistant starch was washed out and the desired accent color brushed through the guiding outlines of the second stencil.

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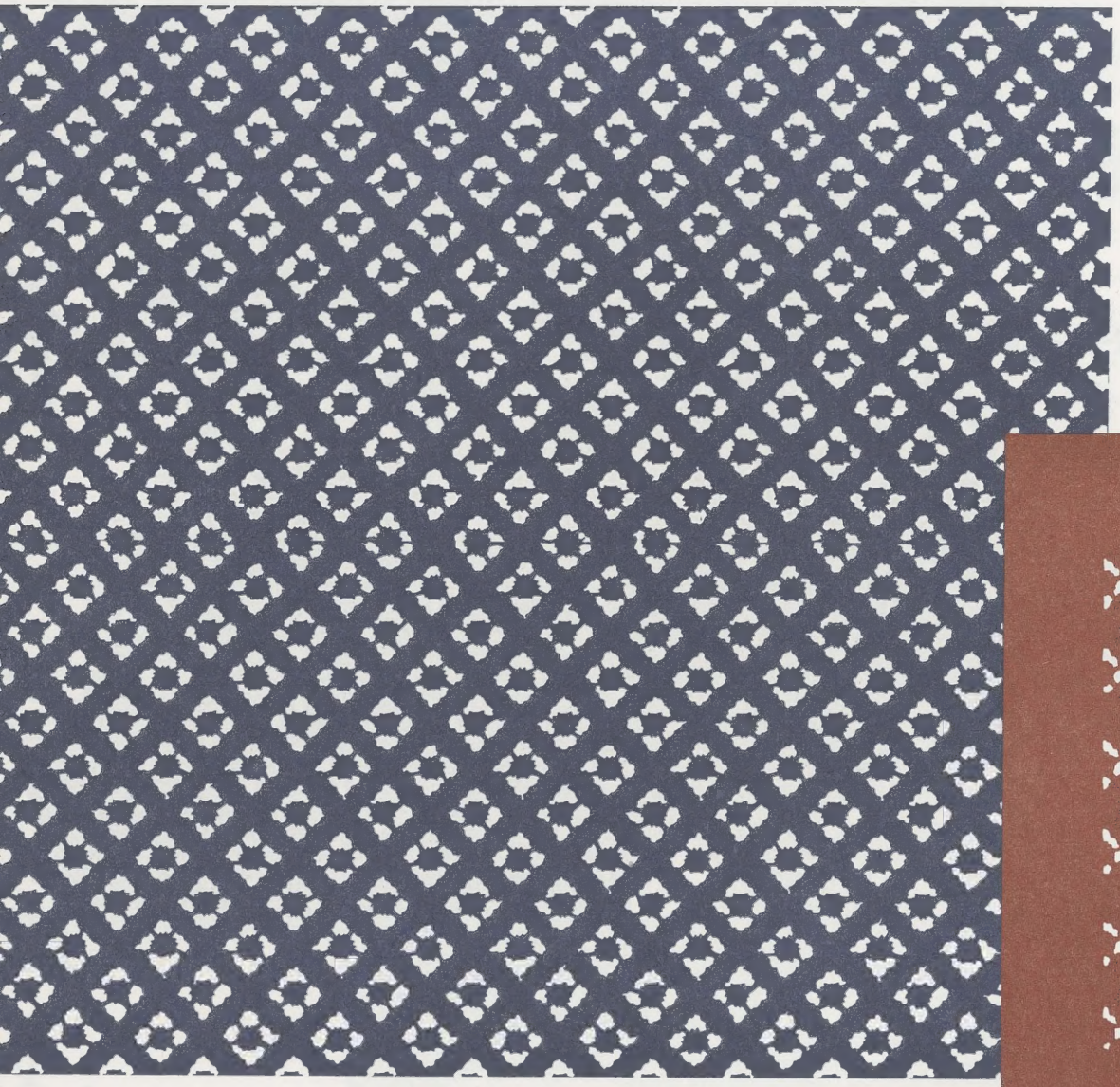
History

Although a twelfth-century pair of gauntlets preserved in the Kasuga Taisha Shrine in Nara provides the earliest evidence of designs created with paper stencils and rice paste, the art of stenciling flourished some six hundred years later during the prosperous Edo Period (1615-1868). The ruling Tokugawa shogunate, strictly regulating a hierarchical society, imposed a social self-consciousness within the capital of Edo (modern-day Tokyo), then one of the largest cities in the world. The snappy fashionable attire worn by Edoites not only expressed individual taste but also reflected economic status. Abhorring the display of luxury by the wealthiest, yet socially lowest, class—merchants—the shogunate issued edicts clarifying class distinction through the decorative motifs of clothing. Minute patterns *(komon),* for example, became reserved for the aristocratic, warrior class. Such regulations, however, only inspired stencil craftsmen to create the bold *chugata* (medium-scale patterns) for the merchants' garments. Most of the stencils in the exhibition represent typical *chugata* motifs.

Made in compliance with governmental rulings, these stenciled fabrics also mirrored the vogue in wearing apparel. The *yukata,* an unlined garment formerly worn as loungewear or an undergarment, gained acceptance for street-wear by mid-Edo. Edoites sported the cotton *yukatas* particularly during the sultry summer months. With the coming of the Meiji Era (1868-1912), *yukata* stencil designs became increasingly larger and bolder.



The majority of stencils surviving from the nineteenth century are thought to be products of stencil carvers living in Ise Province (the present Mie Prefecture). Until the fifteenth century, Kyoto had been the center of the stencil industry. Painters illustrated the Kyoto workshops of stencilers and dyers in their paintings depicting various occupations *(Shokunin Zukushi)*. The devastations of Kyoto during the Onin Civil War (1467-1477), however, created other cultural centers throughout Japan and the necessity of additional stencil industries. The Ise Province, in particular, became an

important one for stencil production. Living within the domain of the ruling Tokugawa clan during the Edo Period, these craftsmen organized a guild that grew stronger with the privileges the clan granted them. Since no dyers lived in the Ise Province, the Ise dealers peddled their stencils throughout Japan. The peddlers, issued licenses and reduced traveling taxes, were assigned specific areas of the country to avoid competition. Virtually monopolizing the *katagami* trade, they discouraged rival stencilers or peddlers in other regions of the country. Although other stencil shops finally opened in the capital, Edo, during the early decades of the nineteenth century, they collaborated with the Ise stencilers, and advertised their wares as the Ise stencils of Edo.

Motifs

The stencils illustrate some of the oldest motifs that have enriched Japanese decorative arts during the past thousand years. Many of the designs originated during the Heian Period (794-1185), an era heralded for the development of indigenous styles in the visual and literary arts. The plovers, or birds, over waves [40] or wisteria (the floral symbol of the ruling Fujiwara clan [7]), for example, first appeared during these centuries. The motif of cart wheels in water [48], often called *katawa-guruma* (''half a wheel''), embellishes a lacquer box presently in the Tokyo National Museum and created during late Heian. Like many of the pictorial motifs in the exhibition, it was inspired by an everyday object observed in everyday circumstances. It was customary to soak wooden cart wheels in shallow streams or rivers to prevent them from drying and cracking when not in use. Their round forms swept by the rhythmic patterns of flowing water captivated the imagination of artists far into the Edo Period.

Numbers appearing in brackets [ ] refer to items in the checklist of the objects in the exhibition.

Since the pictorial and literary arts were intricately entwined during this era, it is not surprising that many of the decorative motifs dating from Heian Japan derive from literary passages. The iris [11], renowned for its purifying properties as well as its beauty, is one of the most famous poetic symbols of the *Tales of Ise,* a tenth-century literary classic. While journeying to the eastern provinces, a band of homesick courtiers express their loneliness through poems inspired by the scenic beauties of specific locations. At a place called *Yatsuhashi,* "Eight Bridges" [10], the beautiful irises growing in the marshy shoals of the eight streams inspired one of the poems. By the eighteenth century, irises combined with plank bridges became the recognized symbols of this narrative episode due to the decorative paintings of popular artists.

Although floral motifs and their seasonal connotations are innate to Japanese taste, many of the realistic flower studies depicted in the stencils have Chinese origins. The camellia [2] and peony [8, 9], for example—the latter connoting prosperity—were introduced to Japan from the mainland during the eighth century. Even the miniature gardens or *bonsai* plants [1], epitomizing the patience of Japanese gardeners,

represent a botanic art nurtured in aristocratic Chinese gardens. Orchids [34], chrysanthemums [12], and banana leaves [21], first appeared as scholarly symbols in the Chinese monochrome paintings that inspired fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Japanese artists. Eventually, they too became widely known and were adapted into the pictorial vocabulary of the minor, decorative arts.

Unique among the stencil designs in the exhibition are those combining geometric and inanimate designs that can also be traced to Chinese decorative arts. The *takara-zukushi* ("various treasures") pattern isolates against a geometric, grid pattern those objects thought to contain magic powers [38]. The *kakuremino* (a coat that renders its wearer invisible) and the *hoju* ("magic pearl") inside the *shippo* ("seven kinds of precious stones"), or the interlocking circles, generally adorned clothing worn on congratulatory occasions. Likewise, the *shokko* pattern [37], an elaborate geometric form, derives from Chinese Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) woven fabrics. Appearing first in Japanese woven fabrics, the design later made its way into the stencil repertoire. This geometric pattern consists of octagons and connecting squares, both frequently surrounding floral motifs.

The stencils also highlight some of the unique elements comprising Japanese design. Even the most casual perusal of the works in the exhibition reveals the dominance of natural motifs gently manipulated into graceful, asymmetrical designs. The two stencils of peony blossoms are obvious examples [8, 9]. Although only one peony occupies the former design and two intersect the other, in each composition branches connect the design to a corner of the stencil, establishing a sharp diagonal pattern. Bold

diagonals, in fact, permeate many of the stencils [14, 22, 47]. A common design element in Japanese textiles, *tasuki*—crossing diagonal bands or lines—also frequently appear as asymmetrical elements in background patterns. Bamboo trellises, accented by morning glory vines [6], may comprise the *tasuki* patterns, as can lozenge patterns composed of paulownias and blossoms [44].

Stylized natural motifs are another common feature of Japanese design so aptly illustrated in the stencils. Flocks of plovers—birds commonly sighted flying along shorelines or over wet marshes—were described in poems included in the first imperial anthology of poetry, the *Kokinshu,* dating from the ninth century. Quickly adapted as a decorative motif, its form was simplified over the centuries from realistic representations to a shorthand notation of a body finished with a simple beaked head. This stylized plover appears in the intricate pattern of one stencil [31] and composes the chief element of another from a set of family crests or *mon* [49]. Waves, pine bark, and snow crystal [42] motifs all further exemplify this sophisticated simplification innate to Japanese design. The "wave patterns," known as *seigai-ha,* accent the surfaces of various stencils [37, 48], while the stylized pine bark [41], known as *matsukawa-bishi,* frequently enclose floral motifs to create a rich, overall pattern.

The stencil designs are so characteristic of the Japanese decorative arts that they are shared with other media, including ceramics and metalwork—like the swordguards or *tsuba* (compare [40] with [57], or [11] with [54]. Lacquerware, represented by the multi-tiered *inro* boxes (compare [37, 48] with [51] and [13, 14] with [52]), was also embellished with many of the same designs. An *inro* is a container for seals or medicines that was worn suspended from the sash of a loose-fitting garment.

Japanese Stencils and the Twentieth Century

Despite technological advances in the contemporary textile industry, *katazome,* the art of stenciling, continues to be practiced by many artists including those most important ones designated by the Japanese government as "National Living Treasures" or "holders of Intangible Cultural Properties." The Cultural Properties Protection Law, enacted in 1950, protects not only outstanding, tangible examples of the fine arts but also the invisible talents of artists (such as potters, weavers, dyers, and stencilers) who continue to work in traditional techniques. Annual stipends help to continue these traditions by funding the training of young successors. Most of the stencil masters still live in Mie Prefecture, where Edo stencil artisans had lived hundreds of years earlier. Although Keisuke Serizawa (1895-1984) was born in this region, he later moved to Tokyo. As a young man, he was a student of Sosetsu Yanagi and participated, along with the potters Shoji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai, in his teacher's folk art movement. Serizawa's active career and important workshop is represented by the bold stencil designs—the stylized pine [60], carp [63], and the symbols of the four seasons [61]—that propel the tradition into the twentieth century, continuing those recurring rhythms in the Japanese decorative arts.

Dyeing Workshop
From a six-fold screen, *Various Craftsmen at Their Work (Shokunin Zukushi)*
Ink and color on paper
Edo Period (1615-1868)
Suntory Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan

Checklist of Objects in the Exhibition

The objects listed below are classified by their media and decorative motifs.

JAPANESE STENCILS *(Katagami)*
Mulberry paper, persimmon tannin, and silk thread.
Late Edo-Early Meiji Period, 19th century.
The Dudley P. Allen Fund (except as noted below)

1 *Bonsai Pots: Flowering Peony and Plum* 25.166
26-7/8 x 16-13/16 in.

2 *Camellias in Baskets* 25.209
24-3/4 x 16-3/8 in.

3 *Chrysanthemums and Peonies in Baskets* 25.214
26-1/4 x 16-3/8 in.

4 *Cucumber Vines and Stylized Plovers* 25.178
27-1/2 x 16-3/8 in.

5 *Morning Glory Vines* 25.169
25-5/16 x 16-5/16 in.

6 *Flowering Vines against a Bamboo Trellis* 25.175
16-1/8 x 27-3/4 in.

7 *Wisteria against Tasuki (crossed diagonal lines or bands) Trellis* 25.216
24-5/8 x 16-1/4 in.

8 *Peonies* 25.190
24-3/4 x 16-3/8 in.

9 *Peony* 25.196
24-3/4 x 16-5/8 in.

10 *Iris: Yatsuhashi, "Eight Bridges"* 25.201
24-1/2 x 16-1/2 in.

11 *Iris* 25.197
24-13/16 x 16-1/2 in.

12 *Chrysanthemums*
27-3/16 x 16-15/16 in.
Anonymous Loan

13 *Pine Branches and Streams* 25.203
25 x 16-7/16 in.

14 *Pine Needles in Diagonal Bands* 25.205
24 x 17 in.

15 *Pine Tree Branches* 25.231
16-1/4 x 22-5/8 in.

16 *Cicada and Evergreen Trees* 25.206
25-3/16 x 16-5/16 in.

17 *Cicada and Palm Trees* 25.202
16-1/16 x 24-3/16 in.

18 *Trees and Webs* 25.191
22-1/8 x 16-5/8 in.

19 *Turnips and Webs* 25.185
24-7/16 x 16 in.

20 *Dragonflies and Webs* 25.225
16-1/8 x 23 in.

21 *Banana Leaves* 25.222
23-3/16 x 16 in.

22 *Banana Leaves and Thunderbolts* 25.181
15-7/8 x 27-3/8 in.

23 *Dragons and Swirling Clouds* 25.223
22-1/2 x 15-1/2 in.

24 *Carp and Nets* 25.186
22-1/2 x 15-13/16 in.

25 *Carp in Swirling Water* 25.189
24-7/16 x 16-1/4 in.

26 *Flying Geese and Round Fan (uchiwa)* 25.233
23 x 15-7/8 in.

27 *Flying Geese, Bamboo, and Spirals* 25.221
22-7/8 x 16-1/8 in.

28 *Flying Geese, Folding Fans, and Poem Paper* 25.220
22-3/4 x 15-7/8 in.

29 *Flying Cranes* 25.236
22-13/16 x 15-3/8 in.

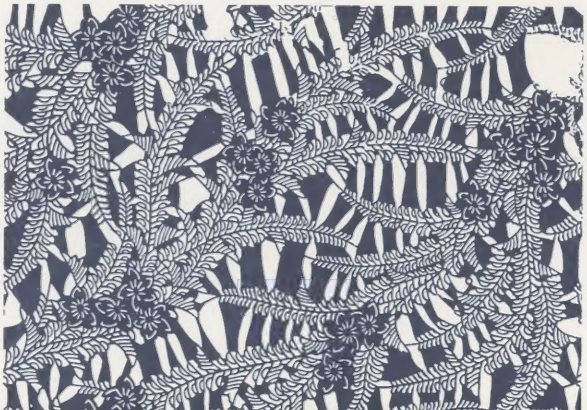
30 *Ducks in Reeds* 25.192
24-15/16 x 16-1/2 in.

31 *Umbrellas and Plover* 25.234
22-5/8 x 15-7/8

32 *Crows* 25.212
25-13/16 x 16-3/16 in.

33 *Toad in Grass* 25.193
16-1/2 x 24-3/4 in.

34 *Orchids and Circular Floral Motifs against Trellis* 25.172
27 x 16-1/2 in.



35 *Poem Papers with Floral Motifs, Mandarin Ducks, and Fishing Nets* 25.208
25 x 16-1/2 in.

36 *Fan and Square Poem Paper (shikishi) with Flowers and Branches of Fruit* 25.200
23-9/16 x 16-3/4 in.

37 *Shokko Diaper Enclosing Peonies and Overlapping Waves (seigai-ha)* 25.173
27-1/16 x 16-5/8 in.

38 *Various Treasures (takara-zukushi), Including a Magic Coat (kakure-mino) and a Treasure Pearl (hoju) inside Seven Kinds of Precious Stones, the Interlocking Circles (shippo)* 25.226
16-7/8 x 22-7/8 in.

39 *Birds in Flight* 25.227
Pair of stencils, 22-3/4 x 16-3/8 in.

Birds in Flight 25.228
Pair of stencils, 22-3/4 x 16-1/2 in.

40 *Plovers and Wave (chidorigata) against Geometric Background* 25.239-.239a
Pair of stencils, 16-1/4 x 12-5/8 in.

41 *Pine-Bark (matsukawa-bishi) Diaper Enclosing Flowering Plants* 25.248-.248a
Pair of stencils, 16 x 9-3/8 in.

42 *Peonies, Snow Crystals, and Fans against Striated Background* 25.241-.241a
Pair of stencils, 16 x 12 in.

43 *Poem Papers with Mandarin Ducks and Fishing Nets* 25.208
25 x 16-1/2 in.

44 *Lozenge Diapers (tasuki) of Paulownias and Blossoms* 25.249-.249a
Pair of stencils, 16-1/4 x 9-1/2 in.

45 *Paulownia against Decorated Checkers (ishidatami) Background* 25.251-.251a
Pair of stencils, 16-1/4 x 9-1/2 in.

46 *Flower Clusters* 25.253-.253a
Pair of stencils, 16-1/4 x 9-7/8 in.

47 *Floral Lozenge Diapers (tasuki)* 25.250-.250a
Pair of stencils, 15-7/8 x 9-1/4 in.; 15-7/8 x 9 in.

48 *Wheels in Water with Diaper, Overlapping Waves (seigai-ha) and Shippo Patterns* 25.204
25-1/4 x 16-9/16 in.

49 *Set of Family Crest (mon) Stencils*
12 stencils, signed
Kikuchi Kiyomatsu, Japanese, Meiji Period
The Mitzi Verne Collection

INRO

An *inro* is a multi-chambered case for carrying seals or medicine. It is held together by cords connecting the individual compartments and suspended over an *obi* or waistband. A *netsuke*, a miniature toggle carved from ivory, wood, or jade, is fastened to the end of the cord to anchor the *inro*, while the *ojime*, or bead, slides along the cords to keep the *inro* closed. Japan, Edo Period (1615-1868).

50 *Dragon in Sea before Fuji*
L. 3-3/4 in.
The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Collection 44.216

51 *Carp Ascending Waterfall (seigai-ha pattern at bottom)*
3-1/2 x 1-7/16 in.
Gift of D. Z. Norton 16.841

52 *Pine, Moon, and Ivy*
3-1/4 x 2-1/4 in.
Gift of D. Z. Norton 16.851

47

44

TSUBA

***Tsuba* are sword guards or thin pieces of metal that separate the handle of the sword from the blade. Japan, Edo Period, nineteenth century.**

53 *Pine Tree*
D. 2-3/4 in.
Gift of D. Z. Norton 19.306

54 *Iris*
D. 2-15/16 in.
Gift of D. Z. Norton 19.364

55 *Diaper Pattern*
D. 2-7/8 in.
Gift of D. Z. Norton 19.281

56 *Shippo Pattern*
2-5/8 in. square
Gift of D. Z. Norton 19.506

57 *Plovers in Waves*
D. 3-1/2 in.
Gift of D. Z. Norton 19.413

STENCILED FABRIC AND PAPER

58 Futon (mattress) cover: *Flying Cranes and Pine Branches*
Cotton, 59-1/2 x 39 in.
Japan, Edo Period, late 19th century
Antiques Kayoko

59 Futon (mattress) cover: *Flying Cranes and Chrysanthemum*
Cotton, 67 x 38 in.
Japan, Edo Period, late 19th century
Antiques Kayoko

60 *Noren* (curtain): *Single Pine*
Cotton, 58 x 34 in., 1970s, signed
Keisuke Serizawa (1895-1984), Japanese
The Mitzie Verne Collection

61 Wall Hanging: *Symbols of the Four Seasons*
Cotton, 33 x 46 in., 1970s, signed
Keisuke Serizawa
The Mitzie Verne Collection

62 Fan: *Iris*
Paper, 16-1/2 x 11-1/2 in.
Keisuke Serizawa
The Mitzie Verne Collection

63 *Fish for a Boy's Day*
Paper, 17-1/2 x 13
Tokuhiro Tajima, Japanese, 20th century

Note on the Collection

The Museum's collection of stencils was originally assembled in Japan by the American, Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908). He was not only the first westerner to introduce Japanese art to the West but was also instrumental in Japan's early efforts to preserve its artistic treasures. He spent some twelve years in Japan (1878-1890), first teaching at Tokyo University and later working with the Ministry of Education and the imperial household doing studies on arts administration and programs in the United States and Europe. In 1890 he returned to Boston for seven years to serve as head of the Oriental Department at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where most of his personal collection is now housed.

design / Joseph Finizia